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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 ADDIS ABABA 003365

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SUBJECT: THE OGADEN: INSURGENCY AND COUNTER-INSURGENCY

REF: ADDIS 3200

Classified By: Ambassador Donald Yamamoto for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

SUMMARY

¶1. (S) Apparent support from the Government of Eritrea and elements within Somalia to the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) has moderately improved the tactical capabilities and increased the activities of the largely ineffective nationalist movement in Ethiopia's Ogaden area since early 2006. While the Ethiopian military's (ENDF) overwhelming response, particularly since late-Spring 2007, and the Government of Ethiopia's (GoE) restrictions on access to food has hurt the ONLF, this response risks giving the people of the Somali region greater reason not only to support the ONLF, but also to support those terrorist and extremist individuals and groups operating under the guise of opposition to the GoE. The GoE's recent actions of conscripting civil servants and local communities into militias to combat the insurgents rather than addressing the historic marginalization of the hinterlands have further exacerbated the humanitarian toll in the region. While responding to the terrorist threat is a key objective of the GoE, and they are actively pursuing terrorist networks in southeastern Ethiopia, it is not their counter-terrorism efforts, but rather their counter-insurgency operations against the ONLF, that are driving the humanitarian crisis on the ground. This cable seeks to draw a picture of actions in the region by both the ENDF and the ONLF. An analysis of why the GOE has responded in the manner it has as well as Embassy Addis, thinking on a way forward on the Ogaden follow by septel. End Summary.

¶2. (C) The ONLF is an ethnic-Ogadeni Somali nationalist insurgent movement which has taken up arms against the GoE, and manifestations thereof, to reverse the historical marginalization of the Ogadeni people. The ONLF was established in 1984, partnered with the Tigrean People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and others in the late 1980s to topple the Derg, and became a member of Ethiopia's transitional government in the early 1990s. The ONLF participated in elections in Somali region in 1992, winning over 80 percent of the seats in the regional parliament. In 1993 the ONLF objected to the TPLF's attempts to control the administration of the region; the TPLF responded by freezing the region's budget and diverting aid from the region. In response to an ONLF call for a referendum on self determination in February 1994, GoE militia attacked civilians attending an ONLF rally in Warder. The ONLF has pursued armed struggle against the GoE and its armed forces and sponsored militias ever since.

¶3. (C) While the group is believed to enjoy broad support among Ogadeni Somalis throughout the region, it is only estimated to have a few thousand active fighters. Over time, the group's motives have ranged from self-determination, to independence, to establishing "Greater Somalia." Although the ONLF has traditionally employed hit and run style tactics against Ethiopian government and military targets, its apparent support and training from Eritrea and elements within Somalia has resulted in a significant up-tick in ONLF attacks since early 2006. While the ONLF has traditionally

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not targeted civilians, its April 23, 2007 attack on a Chinese oil exploration field in Abole stood out as a unique, yet notable, diversion from its modus operandi that was likely intended to trigger a cessation of outside exploitation of what it sees as Ogadeni resources without adequate consultation with, or compensation to, the Ogadeni people. Despite reports of ONLF animosity against outsiders, and particularly Ethiopian highlanders, this appears more a manifestation of frustration with preferential economic opportunities going to those traditionally in power at the expense of the Ogadenis than a clear indicator of xenophobia.

¶4. (S) Despite its long history, the ONLF today stands as a highly fractured assembly rather than a well coordinated cohesive organization. Sensitive reporting suggests a growing disparity between the Front's political leadership and military commanders stemming from a combination of physical separation and sub-clan differences. Nevertheless, ONLF combatants' compliance with public ONLF calls for unilateral cease-fires in response to NGOs' or UN agencies' operations in parts of Somali region since September suggest that the political leadership does still influence insurgent operations on the ground. While indications that individuals within the ONLF are affiliated with externally based extremists and terrorist groups is increasingly concerning, the ONLF, as an entity, still retains its nationalist character and does not appear to have fundamentally shifted its orientation toward targeting civilians or U.S. or western personnel or interests.

¶5. (C) In the past, U.S. military civil affairs teams and NGOs have encountered ONLF roadblocks or troops in the Ogaden areas. The ONLF response to those groups was, and continues to be, a strong vote of confidence and expression of thanks for their humanitarian and development assistance to the Ogadeni people and region. While there had been reports briefly in 2006 of ONLF teams stopping NGO vehicles to steal supplies, money, and fuel, NGOs who have encountered ONLF checkpoints recently have not reported such behavior. As Ethiopian counterinsurgency operations continue to squeeze the local population, an early-November Embassy team visiting

Degehabur found strong support for the ONLF, and against the GoE and ENDF, among those willing to speak privately. The concern is that the Ogadeni population increasingly views the GoE's actions as having a devastating humanitarian and economic impact and is increasingly swinging their support to the ONLF.

EXTREMISTS GROUPS AND ERITREAN SUPPORT

¶6. (S) While the GoE and the Somali population in Ethiopia have focused their attention on the ONLF when they talk about the "rebels" or the insurgency, there is increasing evidence of other extremist groups and individuals -- who do espouse terrorist tactics -- seeking to expand their presence and planning activities within Ethiopia's Somali region. Such groups -- ranging from remnants of al-Ittihad al-Islami (AIAI), to the United Western Somali Liberation Front (UWSLF), to Aden Hashi Ayrow and al-Shabaab extremists affiliated with transnational terrorist organizations -- continue to seek to establish a presence in Ethiopia's Somali region and to plan operations from there. As each of these groups has an objective of destabilizing the Ethiopian regime, there are reports that the Eritrean Government has provided financial support, materiel, training, and/or safe-haven to these and similar such groups. Sensitive

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reporting demonstrates that U.S. citizens and interests are among the potential targets for these groups. The GoE's strategy of squeezing the ONLF by cutting food flows to the region risks allowing extremist groups to leverage openings among the people of the Somali region by appealing to nationalist or anti-Government sentiments to gain a greater foothold in the region.

CONFLICT DYNAMICS ON THE GROUND

¶7. (C) The Insurgency: While the pace and capabilities of ONLF attacks have increased over the past year, the organization's tactics generally have not changed. With very few exceptions, the ONLF conducts discrete targeted strikes at Ethiopian Government installations, the military, and supply and logistics chains. As noted above, the strike on the Chinese oil firm at Abole was a significant diversion from standard ONLF operations not only in its apparent targeting of civilians, but also in the size and "success" of the attack. As a volunteer guerrilla militia, the ONLF benefits from popular support among the Ogadeni people and the provision of food, supplies, and shelter that such support conveys. While ONLF supporters may join its fighters on the front lines, the ONLF does not conscript militias as such. In lean times, the ONLF has pilfered relief food for resale in order to purchase arms and supplies. As such, there is some anecdotal reporting that suggests that the GoE's current strategy of squeezing the ONLF by limiting food to the people is having some effect in undermining the ONLF's ability to operate. The ENDF offensive against the ONLF, combined with restrictions on food deliveries and movement, has taken a notable toll on the ONLF. Nevertheless, the ONLF remains able to find safe-haven and supply within Somalia, allowing for recuperation and preventing the ENDF and allied militias from defeating them.

¶8. (S) The Counter-Insurgency: The ENDF began the current counter-insurgency campaign in April 2006 when it expelled the U.S. Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA)'s civil affairs teams from Somali region. While the ENDF expected the operation to conclude within three months, it proved ineffectual until it was significantly expanded after the April 2007 ONLF attack on the Chinese firm at Abole. The ENDF soon deployed three divisions into the Ogaden, with regiments scattered throughout, to eliminate the ONLF. ENDF forces pursued ONLF fighters and presumed ONLF supporters with equal abandon. Apart from standard

engagements between armed factions, ENDF forces have restricted the flow of foodstuffs and people between villages and rural areas to prevent support leaking to insurgents. Reports from June alleged the ENDF's use of warplanes to bomb Ogadeni villages and reports throughout the summer accused the ENDF of burning villages of ONLF supporters. While these reports have not been independently verified and, like reports of landmines being laid, are likely attributable to actions by insurgents and the military alike, interviews by Mission personnel with Ogadeni residents point the finger more at the counter-insurgency operations than the ONLF. In response to diplomatic pressure, many of the ENDF troops returned to their barracks in early October, although the total ENDF deployment of three divisions in the region has remained unchanged. The GoE has increasingly conscripted militias to make up for the ENDF withdrawal.

¶9. (S) Militias: Each Ethiopian region maintains its own militia and the Somali regional state has long recruited

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conscripts from among those clans and sub-clans that do not generally support the ONLF. As the overt ENDF presence has dwindled, the military, security service, and Somali regional officials have increasingly bolstered the traditional militias, and replaced the military's counter-insurgency operations with civilian militia operations fueled by forced conscription of civil servants. Much like an Embassy assessment team encountered in Degehabur in early-November, throughout the region government security services forcibly conscript civil servants to fight in the front lines. Civil servants informed Mission personnel that they cannot refuse as they would be accused of being ONLF members and would be killed. With civil servants deployed, schools and health facilities have begun to close with some being transformed into bases for the conscripted militia. Government and security officials provide administrative officials, teachers, health workers, and their colleagues with weapons and instructions on where to go to counter the insurgents, but provide limited ammunition and no training in tactics or how to use the weapons. Fighting between the untrained conscripts along the front lines against more experienced ONLF fighters has resulted in a spike in claims of ONLF victories against the "ENDF," such as ONLF claims of killing over 250 ENDF in Warder on October 22 and over 270 between October 26 and November 1. While it is unclear if the shift from ENDF to militias has had any significant effect against the ONLF, it is clear that the deployment in front line militias is quickly depleting the corps of Somali region civil servants. Local citizens have confided to Mission personnel that these tactics actually fuel public sympathies for the ONLF.

COMMENT

¶10. (S) The insurgency and counter-insurgency in the Ogaden are mutually entrenched. The GoE has legitimate security concerns about a stubborn insurgency that is willing to take support from sources that are openly hostile to the government, including some with ties to trans-national terrorists. Unfortunately, the GoE's strong military response, restrictions on movement, trade and food, and forced conscription of civil servants into militias have squeezed not only the ONLF, but also swaths of the civilian population and pushed the Ogaden into a humanitarian crisis. The true irony is that the tactics of both sides have created a situation that will make the future development of the region, which both sides say they want, even more difficult to achieve. For the foreseeable future, absent a dramatic shift on one side or the other, current operations are pitting segments of Ethiopia's Somali population against each other and catching civilians in-between. Post will report septel our analysis as to what is driving the GoE and ENDF's response in the Ogaden, as well as our recommendations on a possible way forward.

